

VZCZCXRO3270
RR RUEHIK
DE RUEHTH #1393/01 2151305
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 031307Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0519
INFO RUEHIK/AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001393

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
STATE PASS U.S. FOREST SERVICE
STATE PASS TO USAID/OFDA
STATE PASS FEMA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [SOCI](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: AS 2009 FIRE SEASON COMMENCES, CONCERNS CONTINUE OVER LEVEL
OF GREEK PREPAREDNESS

REF: 08 ATHENS 851; 08 ATHENS 1660

Summary

1.(SBU) Two years after the devastating 2007 fire season that saw more than one million acres of land destroyed and nearly one hundred lives lost to wildfires, concerns continue over the government's ability to respond to a similar crisis. Hot summers, little rainfall, the natural flora, and arson make Greece particularly susceptible to wildfires. The GoG was largely overwhelmed by and unable to respond to the magnitude of the problem during the 2007 fire season. While a good deal of training and foreign assistance ensued, the 2008 fire season was low in its intensity and did not provide ample opportunity to test the GoG's newly developed skills and capacities. As the 2009 season gets under way, the media has raised concerns about the preparedness of the Hellenic Fire Service (HFS). As of the end of June, there had already been more than 200 hundred small and medium-sized outbreaks of wildfires in mainland Greece and throughout the islands, resulting in the destruction of more than 2000 acres of land. In a recent meeting with EconIntern, Ioannis Kapakis, the Press Officer for the HFS, advised that he sees this summer as having the potential to be another difficult one but is optimistic that the lessons learned from past summers, foreign training and assistance provided thus far, and preventative measures adopted will combine to lessen the severity of fires and decrease the potential damage. Kapakis indicated, however, that he remains concerned about the ability of the GoG to coordinate between agencies and allocate responsibilities and tasks in the face of catastrophic fires. End Summary.

The 2009 Fire Season:
Continued Capacity Concerns

12. (SBU) Traditionally, the fire season in Greece begins during the final week of June and lasts until the end of August (and can even continue into September if temperatures and dry conditions persist). The Hellenic Fire Service (HFS) goes into an intense state of readiness during this period, prepared to fight wildfires whenever and wherever they may break out. As of the end of June, the total number of wildfires in Greece had already climbed to over 200, resulting in the destruction of more than 2000 acres of land. Recently, two major forest fires occurred on the islands of Skopelos and Evia. Planes, helicopters, and 80 firefighters were called into action to combat the two separate blazes, which together destroyed 123 acres. During the last week in July, the HFS heightened their alert level even further in response to large blazes that broke out on the island of Crete as a result of a spike in temperatures. Greek media have criticized the preparedness of the HFS and, in particular, expressed concern about the lack of adequate operational airpower. Members of the HFS reassured EconIntern that this year's helicopter fleet has been increased by 15 percent from the 2008 level, and it

will be fully operational during the more serious fire season in July and August.

¶3. (SBU) Coordination between the various agencies responsible for handling wildfires has been problematic in the past for the GoG. According to Kapakis, there continues to be a lack of urgency and senior-level attention, and communication regarding the potential outbreak of large scale wildfires and how to combat them remains inconsistent. During the devastating fire season of 2007, assistance and funding poured in from several nations, including the US. However, Greece was unprepared to facilitate or direct this foreign assistance. The resulting struggles and frustrations even prompted some countries to cut off assistance altogether. U.S. assistance has continued in spite of these difficulties and organizational challenges. Kapakis indicated to EconIntern that, even at present, integration and coordination between the relevant GoG actors responsible for preparing for and dealing with wildfires are still not seamless. He remains hopeful, however, that, as situations arise, the appropriate individuals and agencies will rise to meet challenges.

USG Assistance Efforts

¶4. (SBU) Following the devastating 2007 fires, USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) granted USD 2.2 million to fund a multi-year cooperative effort to exchange information and technical

ATHENS 00001393 002 OF 002

expertise in wildfire management (see reftels A and B). The majority of these funds have been spent on activities that included addressing immediate needs in the aftermath of the 2007 fires, and on technical assistance and capacity building in the two years following the fires. More recent USG efforts have focused on training exercises and include a recent visit by members of the HFS to the US in March and May of 2009. In his recent conversation with EconIntern, Kapakis specifically attributed improvements in HFS's capacity to investigate the causes of fires and to track down and bring to justice those responsible for starting fires as a direct result of USG training.

¶5. (SBU) The U.S. Forest Service (which was tasked with implementing programs with the majority of the funds) is currently focused on working with the GoG to program the remaining funds (USD 276,000) on activities such as "Burned Area Emergency Recovery" (BAER) with the Forestry Department and/or Ministry of Environment & Public Works, senior-level exchange visits with the GoG, continued US-based training with the HFS, and/or follow ups to the fire investigation and fire prevention training already held. In addition, the U.S. has been working with the GoG to construct programs targeted at Forest Management Programs at universities and public schools in the Peloponnese and Epirus regions. FEMA is working with the GoG to execute an MOU to visit Greece in November to train approximately 30 employees of the Interior Ministry's General Secretariat for Civil Protection (to be partially funded by the GoG).

Public Awareness

¶6. (SBU) Greek media often dramatize the causes of wildfires, assigning blame to arsonists working for commercial and residential developers. While Kapakis did not provide statistics to back his claim, he stated that the vast majority of wildfires in Greece are caused by accident rather than by arsonists. Unfortunately, Kapakis explained, inaccurate press reporting that casts the blame on arsonists masks the fact that these fires are largely caused by human carelessness and are, therefore, preventable. Because of this, HFS recognizes a need for increased public awareness on the issue. HFS's focus has been and will continue to be on educating students in primary and secondary schools about certain activities that are inherently dangerous and likely to spark wildfires. A recent wildfire outbreak on the outskirts of Athens, for example, was caused by the discharge of a pistol in a field ripe with low brush - an accident that could have been prevented through awareness and education.

COMMENT

[17](#). (SBU) Kapakis was very thankful for the assistance that the U.S. has given in the areas of fire assistance and prevention, particularly the training of HFS personnel. While this assistance has made some inroads by providing Greece with technical expertise at an operational level, it remains to be seen if the GoG is yet capable of mounting a well-coordinated and well-managed policy in the face of fires of a catastrophic magnitude as in 2007. The fact that Greek fire officials continue to express concerns over coordination and communication and hope that, should disaster strike again, the GoG will rise to the challenge indicates that Greece still has some way to go before it is capable of mounting an effective response to fires that reach a catastrophic magnitude. Kapakis pointed out that the single largest factor that will determine the severity of this year's fire season is the weather. He made clear that, as much as HFS's ability to cope with disasters has improved as a result of more training, resources, and a better understanding of the most effective ways of dealing with large fires, an exceptionally dry season could be devastating. Post joins Kapakis in praying for rain this summer!
End Comment.
SPECKHARD